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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether some level of writing apprehension or some expressed attitude toward writing might result in better essay scores. Subjects, 255 freshmen composition students at two campuses of the California State University system, were administered instruments designed to comparatively measure the quality of students' writing, gauge the level of writing apprehension, and obtain a personal report of attitudes about writing. Sixty-two variables were identified and a series of factor analyses were performed reducing the variables to five components. Further statistical analysis failed to reveal any relationship between writing apprehension and any of the five components until the response category "desire to affect my audience" was added. Then a statistically significant interaction effect of writing apprehension and writing attitude upon essay scores was found. Findings suggest that: rhetorical models invoking audience awareness are confirmed; findings of earlier researchers are confirmed statistically; findings based on the entire sample are generalizable to comparable groups of freshman composition students; and further research needs to be done on subjects who are either extremely apprehensive or have an extreme lack of apprehension about writing. Some implications for teachers are the following: (1) teachers are in extremely important positions in terms of their ability to influence student writing apprehension and attitudes about writing; (2) reasonable efforts should be made to tailor writing material in a fashion that will cultivate and enhance student interest; and (3) teachers need to provide positive feedback of some kind in every case. (Two tables of data are included. (Contains 22 references.) (RS)

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Writers' Fears and Creative Inclinations -- How Do They Affect Composition Quality?

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Review of the Procedures

In an attempt to determine if some level of writing apprehension or some expressed attitude toward writing voluntarily, or some combination of the two, might result in better essay scores than those received by other individuals in a sample group, three instruments were systematically administered to 255 freshman composition subjects at two campuses of the California State University System. These three instruments were to:

(1) Comparatively measure the quality of the subjects' writing;
(2) Gauge the level of the subjects' writing apprehension;
(3) Obtain a personal report of the subjects' attitudes about writing

The composition exercises (i.e. essays) were holistically graded (Myers, 1980); the Writing Apprehension Tests were scored (Daly and Miller, 1975); and the responses to the attitude questions were analyzed and tallied (Purves and Rippere, 1968; Myers, 1980).

Sixty-two variables were identified and a series of factor analyses were performed reducing those original 62 variables to five components. Further statistical analysis failed to reveal any relationship between writing apprehension and any of the five components. However, "I like to write voluntarily," "I don't like to write," and "I am neutral in my attitude toward writing" were not explicitly and manifestly expressed attitudes aligned within the five components. Instead, these attitudes were submerged and inferred. Therefore, various patterns of the subjects' overt expressions were carefully examined to see if they could justifiably be accepted as expressions of those three positions.

Three expressions were identified as overt indications of "inclination to write and willingness to do so voluntarily"--

"Anything encourages me."
"I enjoy writing to friends (e.g. letters)."
"I enjoy writing for myself (e.g. diaries, journals, poetry, etc.)"

Two expressions were identified as overt indications of "dislike of writing and inclination to avoid it" --

"Lack of interest in writing keeps me from writing."
"I'd rather call or speak."

The factorial alignment of two other expressions also resulted in their acceptance as expressions of "dislike of writing and inclination to avoid it" --

"I am encouraged to write when I am required to (deadlines help me)."

together with omission of all reference to

"New (unique) ideas and experiences could make writing easier."

All other response categories were accepted as expressions of neutrality.

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With these definitions, seven uniquely discernible levels of writing apprehension emerged. However, the combination of the writing apprehension levels and the identified attitudes toward writing failed to produce a statistically significant effect on essay scores until an additional response category was accepted as part of the definition of "Like to write; do so voluntarily." That response category was, "Desire to affect my audience." Inclusion of this response category effectively expanded the "Like to write" expression to: "I am inclined to write; do so voluntarily; and am aware of my audience and of the importance of considering their reaction to my essay." Once this response category was accepted, the seven discernible levels of writing apprehension and the three attitudes toward writing resulted in a statistically significant interaction effect upon the essay scores. (See ANOVA, Table 1 below.)

TABLE 1

ANOVA

Effect on Essay Scores of Different Levels of Writing Apprehension and Inclination to Write Voluntarily using definition of "Like to write; do so voluntarily; and am aware of my audience and of the importance of considering their reaction to my essay"

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Value	PR > F
Model	19	286.43450989	15.07550052	1.96	0.0114
Error	235	1811.11434266	7.70686954		
Corrected Total	254	2097.54885255			

Conclusions and Implications for Further Research

(a) Acceptance of that final response category ("Desire to affect my audience") and the linchpin nature of its impact served to confirm the value of the rhetorical model hypothesized by Flower and Hayes (1980). Nuances concerning the importance of this response category, such as how various considerations of and conceptualizations of the audience may influence the effectiveness of students' composition, need to be examined further. A number of theorists from Moffett (1968b) to Perdue (1987) and Fox (1988) have expressed the desirability of audience awareness but very little specific research has been done in this respect.

(b) Once again, subjects in this study have shown themselves willing to be sufficiently candid in response to "self-report" questions to permit continued exploration of underlying aspects of their attitudes and feelings. This is consistent with the earlier research findings of Cronbach (1970) and Nunnally (1970, 1978).

(c) The findings of earlier researchers (Daly, 1979; Petrosko, Kaiser and Dietrich, 1984; Wolcott and Buhr, 1987) have been confirmed statistically, since low apprehensives (those with scores of 79 and above) have been shown to produce essay scores that are significantly higher than those produced by high apprehensives (individuals with scores of 78 and below).

(d) The interaction of writing apprehension levels and attitudes toward writing has been shown to have a statistically significant effect on essay scores. This is an extremely important finding because of the correlational relationship it reveals.

Writing apprehension has been shown to be a situational construct (Daly and Hailey, 1984) and it is therefore subject to change from one situation to another. Behavioral literature also indicates that attitudes can be changed (Watson, 1957; Bereiter and Engleman, 1966; Skinner, 1971; Thoresen, 1973). How student writing apprehension can be changed, how attitudes toward writing can be changed, and how such changes may influence composition quality for a population of subjects experiencing those changes is all fertile ground for further research.

(e) The data of the study also indicate that in the absence of the interaction effect mentioned in "(d)" above, writing apprehension has the same effect across all groups despite the previously cited tendency for low apprehensives to produce composition scores that are significantly higher than those produced by high apprehensives.

(f) Identifying the three attitudes toward writing and deriving those definitions from the voluntary comments of student writers, confirms the contention of Wolcott and Buhr (1987) that such attitudes can be identified. This also broadens the context for applying such definitions and provides a mechanism for the use of such definitions in future research.

(g) Findings such as those in Table 1, page 2 and Table 2, page 4, which are based on the overall sample of 255 subjects are generalizable to comparable groups of freshman composition students.

However, findings such as those which are based on the subpopulation contained within the individual cells of Table 2 should not be considered generalizable. Sample sizes ranged from no subjects who "Like to write; do so voluntarily" within the Extremely Apprehensive (26-53) level to 25 subjects with "Neutral" attitudes within the "Moderately Lacking in Apprehension" level (79-89). Further research is necessary to determine if the expressions of opinions and desires articulated by those within these subsample cell groupings will also characterize larger populations of student writers and be generalizable.

(h) Further research needs to be done within the under-represented 114-130 writing apprehension level which experiences "Extreme Lack of Apprehension." This is especially true of students with "Neutral" attitudes at that level, who were only represented by a single subject within this study.

(i) Further research needs to be done within the "Extremely Apprehensive" (26-53) writing apprehension level, particularly to determine more definitively if there is some extreme level of apprehension which those who write voluntarily simply do not experience.

TABLE 2

Essay scores derived by accepting "Like to write; do it voluntarily" as defined by "Encourages 1," "Encourages 3," "Encourages 4" and "Encourages 19"

Writing Apprehension Level	Inclination to Write	Essay Mean Score	Number of Subjects
Extreme Lack of Apprehension 114 - 130	Neutral	12.00	1
	Do not like to write	6.33	3
	Like to write; do it voluntarily	7.38	8
Comparatively Little Apprehension 100 - 113	Neutral	7.08	13
	Do not like to write	8.03	12
	Like to write; do it voluntarily	6.41	17
Limited Apprehension 90 - 99	Neutral	7.05	21
	Do not like to write	6.67	10
	Like to write; do it voluntarily	8.53	20
Moderately Lacking in Apprehension 79 - 89	Neutral	7.23	25
	Do not like to write	7.40	21
	Like to write; do it voluntarily	5.00	13
Moderately Apprehensive 67 - 78	Neutral	5.76	17
	Do not like to write	6.20	22
	Like to write; do it voluntarily	7.00	15
Very Apprehensive 54 - 66	Neutral	6.03	11
	Do not like to write	6.85	13
	Like to write; do it voluntarily	7.61	6
Extremely Apprehensive 26 - 53	Neutral	2.89	3
	Do not like to write	6.50	4
	Like to write; do it voluntarily		0

Conclusions and Implications for Teachers

(a) The statistically documented interrelations between writing apprehension and attitude toward writing should not be construed as "causing" the quality of composition at the different levels. In fact, the opposite may be the case; it may be that the ability to write and the graded responses that students get on their composition exercises may influence either the level of apprehension they feel when they have to write in school or may help form their attitudes toward writing. This study shows that an interaction effect exists but it does not indicate what causes what.

(b) Teachers are in extremely important positions in terms of their ability to influence student writing apprehension and student attitudes toward writing because of their influence on the learning environment, the nature of assignments, the composition setting, the pertinence and respectfulness of the feedback, etc. It simply is impossible to overstate the importance of this aspect of teaching.

(c) Despite the statistical data, "subjects" must be seen as individual people with individual characteristics, problems, and potentialities. No subject within this study received an 8.53 or a 7.08 essay score although those were the mean scores of certain groups. (See Table 2, page 4). There is still individuality at every level and in the attempt to find common, generalizable meaning teachers must not lose sight of the fact that teachers and researchers alike are ultimately dealing with individual students.

(d) Subjects repeatedly expressed the desire for writing to be easier and more tailored to themselves. It is not easy but reasonable efforts should be made to tailor material in a fashion that will cultivate and enhance student interest.

(e) Most subjects would unquestionably like to be able to write better, although they often seem to be somewhat at a loss to know what to do in order to make themselves better. Some subjects are deeply appreciative of the courses they are taking and the ones they have taken in the past. However, many of them expressed great frustration with academic systems which seem too often to thwart their desire to learn.

(f) Subjects would clearly like to be helped in better ways. Even a casual glance at the tally sheets indicates any number of ideas that repeatedly occurred, expressing student opinions of how they feel they can be helped: Interesting subject matter, concrete instructions, sufficient information, constructive feedback, etc.

(g) In trying to remain aware of the differing attitudes and the levels of apprehension of students' experience, teachers need to be careful to provide positive feedback of some kind in every case where a comment is made. Realistically, this may be difficult. Teachers need to bear in mind that the most malleable aspect of the teaching process is the students themselves. Consider the foregoing comments. If the students would like for writing to be easier, if they would like to be helped in better ways, and if they would like

to be able to write better, then ultimately what they are really saying is, "I want to feel good about my writing. I want to have a good attitude about it." Teachers have powerful influence over whether or not those wishes can be fulfilled.

Summary Comments

In 1902, John Dewey observed that three critical educational elements are: the learner, the needs and aims of society, and the subject matter itself. He noted the inclination to consider these elements separately and to insist upon prioritizing one at the expense of the other two so that, instead of seeing them as complementary and mutually enhancing, each develops its own constituency in an ongoing battle that results in a continuous shift of emphasis from one to another while avoiding the obvious conclusion that all three need to be simultaneously prioritized.

In the field of composition, those who continue to insist upon teaching grammar or who diminish the importance of grammar and then teach it anyway or who support any of the other far more effective modes of composition instruction, are focused on the subject matter itself and are part of constituences that are prepared to defend those positions. Those who are concerned about decline in writing proficiency scores, are focused on the aims and needs of society and wish to prioritize those aims and needs. Subjects of this study who have reponded to the open-ended questions by saying, "Don't critize my style; judge me on content; let me write on subjects like sports and rock and roll," are restrictively focused on the learner and his potentially narrow, parochial and whimsical desires.

Obviously, a disproportionate emphasis on the needs of the learner will skew the educational process every bit as much as disproportionate emphasis of the other priorities have skewed it in the past. However, the needs of student writers must be taken into consideration in reasonable ways. The place for grammar is within the teacher to be drawn forth and used interactively when it is actually needed instead of being taught routinely and comprehensively (Cook, 1946). Proportional concern for the needs of society is important as is concern about appropriate subject matter (Dewey, 1916, 1938) but to expect to be able to teach students to write without deliberately, consciously seeing them as individuals and taking into consideration the uniqueness of each writing experience and the personal and collective feelings that are involved in the process of writing, is to expect something that is essentially impossible (Walsh, 1989).

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